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CONSTRUCTING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITIES ON THE WEB: A CASE STUDY OF ROYAL DUTCH/SHELL

ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyse two of the e-mail exchanges that had been posted on Royal Dutch/Shell's Web site in order to investigate how organizational identities are constructed through processes of description, questioning, contestation and defence. Organizational identities may be regarded as ongoing arguments between insiders and between ostensible insiders and outsiders, who deploy various persuasive techniques in their efforts to render hegemonic their versions of an organization's identity. Making plausible through persuasive rhetoric is a complex task, and requires a discourse analytic methodology and an analytical focus on whole utterances, in order to explicate how identity-as-argument is enacted. The research implications of our paper are twofold. First, by focusing on language as an opaque phenomenon, taken-for-granted ways of being persuasive are made strange and hence more visible. Second, our understanding of organizations as situated in ongoing, multi-focused arguments, illustrates a new way of conceptualising the polyphonic, genre-relevant nature of institutional identities.

Key words: Argumentation, Discourse, Organizational Identity, Royal Dutch Shell, Web Site Identity

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses two of the e-mail exchanges that had been posted on Shell's Web site interactive Forum, in order to investigate how organizational identities are constructed through processes of description, questioning, contestation and defence. In contrast with 'essentialist' approaches we regard organizational identities as discursive achievements, and stakeholders in organizations as rhetors (persuaders) engaged in on-going identity-centred debates. Our suggestion is that organizations are best characterised as having multiple identities, and that these identities are authored in conversations between notional 'insiders', and between notional 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Identity construction, we suggest, may be regarded as an ongoing argument that, while never 'won' (Tsoukas, 1999), may be temporarily quietened by recourse to 'witcraft' (Billig, 1996, p.113).

The dialogues we analyse are ostensibly those between Shell employees and members of the general public, though the identities and affiliations of those who posted the messages are sometimes unstated or disguised. Use of the site raises intriguing questions relating to organizations' identities (Albert and Whetten, 1985), reputations (e.g., Elsbach, 1994; Gioia and Thomas, 1996), and construed external images (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). While the construction and representation of organizational identities has received considerable attention (e.g., AMR, 2000), relatively little of this work has examined how they are constructed through processes of interaction with outsiders. Still less attention has been paid to those Web-based locations where identity-work takes place. Predicated on an understanding that identities are continuous processes, we neither regard interactants as informants nor speculate on internal forces, but focus instead on the interactions in which identity

constructions are deployed and achieved (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). The notion of an argumentative context suggests that interactants are not simply engaged in *persuading* an homogenous audience, but taking up a *position* in a multi-voiced controversy (Billig, 1996; Shotter, 1992). We adopt an explicitly constructionist approach (e.g., Dijk, 1985; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) in our efforts to understand how the identities of Shell evolve through electronically mediated conversations.

Issues centred on organizational identities now constitute a major domain of research within organization studies (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). Evident in the literature are not just functionalist and interpretive but also psychodynamic and postmodern approaches (Gioia, 1998; Porter, 2001). The identities of organizations have been variously defined as, for example, what is central, distinctive and enduring (Albert and Whetten, 1985), '*the theory that members of an organization have about who they are*' (Stimpert, Gustafson and Sarason, 1998, p.87), and as 'the totality of repetitive patterns of individual behavior and interpersonal relationships' (Diamond, 1993, p.77). Theoretical and empirical studies have tended to implicate identity constructs suggesting either that organizations are super-persons (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001), or that the identities of organizations consist of certain shared or common characteristics (e.g., Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997). Both constructs are problematic. The former are liable to accusations of reification and anthropomorphism, while the latter make it difficult to distinguish between identities and other shared properties of organizations such as cultures and climates (Whetten, 2002). These problems, we maintain, symptomise the need for a constructionist approach that employs a discourse analytic methodology. Such an approach is, we maintain, particularly well suited to analysing

the multiple identities that individuals and groups attribute to organizations, and which are often constructed in interaction.

Considerable attention has been devoted to the relationships between organizational identities, construed external images (participants' perceptions of how outsiders view their organization), and reputations (the 'actual' perceptions of outsiders as they refer to the organization) (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach, 1994). Research suggests that insiders' understandings of their organization's identities influence their efforts to manage reputations, and that their construed external images shape their perceptions of organizational identities and their efforts at reputation management (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Schultz, Hatch and Larsen, 2000). Most studies have been concerned with senior managers' attempts to manipulate outsiders' organization-related perceptions by, for example, offering explanations and excuses that rationalize their activities and justify outcomes (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). Much of this work is problematic because it fails to acknowledge that organizational identities are not fixed but dynamic (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000), and that participants within an organization may have multiple, competing, views regarding their organization's construed external image and identity (Harrison, 2000). In addition, organizations tend to be attributed multiple reputations by different external stakeholders (Schultz, Hatch and Larsen, 2000). We contribute to these debates through a consideration of 'reputation', 'image' and 'identity' as discursively negotiable entities.

One key assumption we make is that the identities of organizations are authored not just by 'insiders' but by 'outsiders', and through interactions between 'insiders' and

'outsiders'. This view builds on critiques of the 'container' view of organizations, and the growing recognition of the fuzziness of organizational boundaries which make sharp distinctions between 'internal' and 'external' communication difficult to sustain (e.g., Cheney and Vibbert, 1987; Cheney and Christensen, 2001). It also draws on the argument that organizations may be regarded as rhetors (or persuaders) engaged in identity-centred dialogues with their stakeholders (e.g., Cheney, 1991). Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) study of how the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey responded to the issue of homelessness is a notable illustration of the importance of the ongoing conversations between ostensible 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in influencing conceptions of organizational identities. While Dutton and Dukerich portray organizational participants as responding to alterations in their company's construed external image, our suggestion is that members of organizations are often better conceived as proactive shapers of the conversations in which organizational identities are evolved. As Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000, p.70) have ably expressed it: 'Identity involves interactions and interrelationships between insiders and outsiders'.

Rather than simplistically seeking to explain the links between identities, construed external images and reputations in a reductive way, we need to embrace the multiplicity of different ways in which organizations are conceived, (both from within and outside), in order to better appreciate the dynamic complexity of organizational life. Organizations are linguistic social constructions, and organization a processual and emergent phenomenon (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). From this perspective, organizational identities, together with their images and reputations, are best regarded as continually constituted and reconstituted through dialogical processes (Boden, 1994). For any organization, there is no essential identity, image or reputation that

can be surfaced, but many accounts of them, which variously compete, resist, undermine and borrow from each other. The linguistic constructions of organizational participants, and external stakeholders, are thus valuable resources for a type of identity research that avoids reification and anthropomorphism and embraces dynamism and pluralism.

Our arguments are contained in four main sections. First, we provide an account of our research site and methods. Second, we present an analysis of two e-mail exchanges that indicate some of the textual ways in which organizational identities are constructed and contested. Third, we discuss our analyses in the context of the literature on organizational identity. Finally, we draw some brief conclusions.

RESEARCH SITE AND METHODS

The World Wide Web, as a relatively new genre of communication, is still emerging as a variant of more established genres (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994; Wynn and Katz, 1997), a genre being understood as a system of action recognisable by repetition (Czarniawska, 1997). With the exception of fora for interactive exchange, corporate Web sites are largely a mix of information already available in printed media. One criticism of this is that in mimicking paper forms of communication, the user under-utilises the power of the new electronic medium (Dillon and Gushrowski, 1999). The relatively unique aspect of this communicative genre, the interactive forum, is, therefore, where we have focused our attention.

Although a novel way of communicating, the Web presence of a company or an individual is still bound by social processes, such as the orderliness of talk, shared

understanding and accountability (Wynn and Katz, 1997). More specifically, communications within companies function as socially recognised communicative actions enacted by members to serve particular purposes (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992). As an example of a genre of organizational communication, a corporate Web presence, which may embrace multiple identities, is not the action of a single person, but is recognised as social actions on behalf of, or in the name of, members of a community. A requirement for interactions to be mutually meaningful suggests ordered, structured, processes. That is, although it is theoretically possible to create a persona free of embodiment on the Web, in practice Web presence generally entails accountability. Other commentators, who have explored computer-mediated identity, have proposed that, even in 'virtual' space, identities are constructed in relation to material and social factors and that there is heightened sensitivity to the few cues that are visible (Correll, 1995). Furthermore, the audience impacts on the identities that may be constructed on the Web site, in so far as wide interests and concerns create a discerning public.

Our theoretical perspective suggests that organizations are socially constructed, emergent, and processual (Arthur, Inkson and Pringle, 1999; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Tsoukas, 1994). Consonant with ethnomethodological principles that treat social life as a display of local understandings (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Garfinkel, 1967), Wittgenstein's (1967) notion of language as a game, and Austin's (1962) speech act theory, we focus on texts as sites of action. In line with studies such as Cunliffe's (2001) analysis of managers as practical authors, and Coupland's (2001) work on newcomer socialization, our methodological approach draws on an eclectic mix of techniques associated with discursive psychology (see Potter, 1996; cf. Brown,

2000; Learmonth, 1999; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). We are particularly indebted to Widdicombe's (1998) argument that what is said, or written, may be treated as a solution to a problem, and Billig's (1996) analysis of the rhetorical nature of talk.

Our interest is in processes of *identities* construction, contest, and defence as they were played out on the Royal Dutch/Shell Forum, a discursive (social) space of approximately 300 pages where identity work was/is done (Widdicombe, 1998) by ostensible Shell 'insiders' and ostensible Shell 'outsiders' through their communicative interactions. We conducted an extensive search of company Web sites, looking in particular for those that offered opportunities for 'outsiders' to engage organization insiders in identity-centred debates. To our surprise, we discovered that while many companies would respond to specific e-mail queries, only Shell provided a site on which the messages posted by 'insiders' and 'outsiders' were accessible to all. While the volume of rich data available to us on the Shell Forum made this the obvious choice of data site, its unique characteristics also meant that it was not possible to find a reasonable comparator.

In anticipation of the criticism that analyses based upon a single case can offer no generalized conclusions, following Knights and Willmott (1992, p.768), we question "whether knowledge generated by nomothetic methodologies is exhaustive of what is worth knowing" about identity processes. As Dyer and Wilkins (1991, p.614) have made clear, the careful study of a single case has frequently led scholars "to see new theoretical relationships and question old ones" in part because such focused research permits "the deep understanding" of an entity. This is not to deny the limitations of single site research, from which it is often difficult to gain comparative insights or to

formulate generalisable theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Our argument is merely that single site research is appropriate for the kind of discursive work that we undertook, which focuses on aspects of identity construction that have been often either disregarded or treated cursorily in mainstream studies.

Our analysis disclosed that the initial messages sent to the Forum often challenged the 'official' narratives of those who claimed to speak/write for Shell and, hence, contested their hegemonic influence (e.g. Burr, 1995; Billig, 1996). In common with those outsiders who used the Forum, we had no way of knowing whether ostensible insiders were responding on their own initiative or, for example, as a result of being required to reply by senior managers [1]. This symptomises important questions regarding the ('official' or not) status of the messages posted by ostensible insiders. These messages often *appeared* to be 'officially sanctioned' because they were posted on a Shell Web-site by apparent Shell insiders, who generally used a Shell e-mail address, and mostly expressed arguments that were, arguably, supportive of the company. However, it was noticeable that some ostensible Shell insiders chose to use a personal (rather than a Shell) e-mail address, and/or explicitly asserted that they were writing in a personal capacity. It is a point of particular interest that, rather than seek to obliterate argument (Billig, 1996), the site invited discussion, argument and criticism which potentially located and accentuated 'gaps' in Shell's leaders' accounts of the organization. We should, though, note that because the official status of the messages posted by ostensible insiders was ambiguous, all such messages could have been plausibly disowned by Shell's leaders at some later date should the need have arisen.

This constructed openness to potential conflict is thus recognised by us as functioning as a rhetorical device (Nelson, Megill and McCloskey, 1987). Our analysis of the messages on this site and Shell's statement of the 'Terms and Conditions' for users of it, together with our communications with the site Webmaster, suggested that the site was actively managed by Shell personnel, albeit with a light touch, through the enforcement of certain game rules (Wittgenstein, 1967). These included that: messages posted on the site would not necessarily be responded to by Shell employees; that messages could be responded to by personal e-mail rather than a posting on the Forum; that the issues raised in in-coming messages could be labelled as being outside the remit of the Forum; and that messages could be blocked, deleted or edited in order to remove profanities, offensive or defamatory material, and breaches of privacy. Arguably, these rules amounted to a claimed *right to silence* that restricted the opportunities of message-posters (e.g., to probe) and their rights (e.g., to take part in a substantive dialogue), which underlined the fact that the Forum was owned by Shell and subject to the control of its operators. It should also be noted that the messages posted by ostensible Shell insiders rarely received a reply from ostensible outsiders justifying their initial contentions in the face of counter-arguments, *thereby indicating a possible claimed right to silence by outsiders*. Some of the consequences of how the site was managed included that: there were a lot of very different sorts of messages touching on a huge range of issues posted on the Forum; that far more messages were posted by ostensible outsiders than insiders; and, that many criticisms and defences of Shell went unanswered.

Our initial data set consisted of all the messages posted on the Forum between 12th January 1998 and 22nd October 2001. At this time the site consisted of five main sub-

fora: ‘Investment’; ‘Heart of the Business’; ‘Commitment to Sustainable Development’; ‘Engagement and Open Communication’; and ‘Values’. The hundreds of messages posted varied in length from 4 to 1,263 words, with the average length of a message being approximately 200 words. We systematically downloaded, printed, and read through the messages posted on these fora in an effort to identify the sorts of messages that were being sent and the nature of the debates to which they contributed. At a relatively early stage we decided that the most fruitful way forward for us would be to analyse a number of interactions in detail, and we focused our attention specifically on the ‘Values’ Forum where we had found a large number of overtly identity-centred messages. Of the five sub-fora, this had the largest number of messages posted on it, 110, a total word count of 28,788, and an average message length of just under 262 words. As the data were examined and re-examined, salient features of the text began to ‘cue’ questions that had already arisen from our reading of the literature. We examined many message and response pairs during this process before focusing on 6 that seemed to us to offer the greatest potential for exploring identity-related issues. From these, themes emerged which are described in this paper as they impinge on just two specific e-mail exchanges. These were chosen because they were ‘typical’ of this particular category of exchange in which identity work was conducted through messages that were lengthy, contained substantial detail and included what we defined as sophisticated identity-relevant arguments.

There are two final points that we would like to make. First, we openly acknowledge that it is us, the authors of this paper, who have selected these messages, and that it is our idiosyncratic analyses that are offered here. We nevertheless suggest that, while our research is not “sample-to-population” generalizable, it does contribute to existing

and new theories of how organizations' identities are linguistically constructed (Eisenhardt, 1989; Firestone, 1993). We also recognise that many other sorts of analysis may usefully be attempted using a forum of this kind, such as quantitative content analyses and qualitative searches for core themes across large numbers of messages. But none of these permit the kind of detailed micro-analyses of how collective identities are constructed in interaction that our approach allows. Second, it is evident that not only have we just focused on two e-mail exchanges, but that much of the visual impact of the web-based genre of communication, such as the use of colour, animation, and graphical imagery, has not been attended to in this account. In an attempt to address these issues, we have provided the URL (http://www.shell.com) of the Web site under discussion. The interested reader may thus take our interpretations and place them within the rich context of Shell's interactive Forum [2].

CASE STUDY: ROYAL DUTCH/SHELL

Prolegomena

The Royal Dutch/Shell Group is one of the largest and most profitable MNCs in the world. In 1995 it was the target for international protests centred on its plans for disposing of a vast oil storage and loading platform (Brent Spar), and its failure to take a public stance against the Nigerian Government, (Shell Nigeria's local business partner), when it executed nine Ogoni environmentalists. These protests 'introduced dissident voices that disrupted Shell's institutionalized ways of seeing and acting', foregrounding 'questions of identity for the company' and challenging 'its modernist rationality' (Livesey, 2001, p.59; cf. Knight, 1998; Lawrence, 1999a). According to some commentators these events not only led Shell to reconceive its social and environmental responsibilities (e.g., Lawrence, 1999b; Mirvis, 2000), but also to

embrace the notion of dialogue with stakeholders. These issues have already been well rehearsed (Livesey, 2001; Tsoukas, 1999), and our interest lies in examining how Shell employees and outsiders construct the organization's identities through interaction.

Official Web-based accounts of Shell's identities (http://www.shell.com) position the organization as being jointly concerned with profit, markets, and economic efficiency on the one hand, and with social responsibility on the other. This storyline is indicative of many commercial organizations' perceived need to be acknowledged as environmentally aware (Power and Laughlin, 1992) and interested in issues of public welfare (Kernisky, 1997) in order to maintain their legitimate status (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). The account incorporates a repertoire of arguments (Sillince, 1999) that address the hegemonic demands of an environmental discourse (e.g., Gergen, 2001) in a way that scholars have variously labelled as 'pragmatic' (Fineman, 1998), 'amoral' (Crane, 2000) and 'unemotional' (Fineman, 1996). Combining and blurring commitments to both economic and ethical principles in identity narratives is potentially risky because it leaves a company open to charges of hypocrisy (cf. Brown and Jones, 2000). This may, however, be a risk that Shell's leaders felt they had no option but to take in the light of major public relations disasters. It is also a discursive strategy that has, arguably, 'served Shell's identity needs and contributed to preserving, though in revised form, the progress myth that underpins modern corporations and a market economy' (Livesey, 2001, p.58/59). It is in this context that our analyses need to be understood.

Message and Response 1

Message: ‘Shell’s saga of façades’

(Red Faced Greenie 27/5/99)

It’s sheer absurdity and bizarre tragedy that Shell is again blowing its trumpets on principled values and sustainable development Whose standard of values other than its own double standards and who's to benefit from its SD initiatives other than its own capitalistic empire of Shell bureaucrats in London and the Hague. A few years ago Shell boasted about its pledge of USD500 million investment in renewable energy but where did it invest the whole lot? Not in countries where they have reaped its global wealth from or in resource-rich developing countries which had been "raped" by Shell of its virgin natural environment. NO! Instead Shell is blase and with full bias putting the larger chunk of its investment in countries/governments where they can easily subdue and submit into giving Shell the freedom of operating without having to pay too much taxation fees to the government coffers for the sole benefits of the people of the land who need it most. Shell's hidden agenda is to put such investment as bribes to the country where it operates so that in the eyes of the world, they're propagating their sustainable development efforts but in reality Shell is neglecting countries where they have been operating for many decades and not giving equal opportunities for those countries to benefit from the large investment given that Shell consider those countries to have taken back much too much already of Shell's "insincere" investments through heavy taxes slapped by the government on Shell. So much so that they're not willing to see that such oil and gas dependant nations will ever diversify its economy. BUT Shell will put more investment of course in such countries for upstream activities since such helpless countries lack the necessary technical expertise and skilled manpower whereby Shell can always set up "Shell-appointed contractors" to reap financial benefits from such large-scale oil and gas infra-structural investments. After all at the end of the day the cash rewards will surely be siphoned off back to London and the Hague or even the EC for that matter now!

In this extract the comments made are explicitly negative. Their forcefulness is due, in part, to suggested alternative motives. These kinds of criticism are difficult to counter as, contrary to the maxim ‘actions speak louder than words’ actions are constructed to be a façade for something else. The negative tone continues in describing the economic interests of the company, for example, in line 4: ‘capitalistic empire of Shell bureaucrats’. Arguably, this is not just a description of a company doing what companies are commonly understood to do. Here excess is constructed.

Finally, a return to the theme of the extract, through 'hidden agenda' (line 13) casts doubt on the morality of Shell. Through interpreting 'investment' as 'bribes', for example, the company's activities are re-defined in critical terms. The following extract is from a response to message 1. It is in the light of this particular description of the organization that this extract carries out the discursive business of (re)constructing a company identity as a rejoinder to an argument.

Response: 'Sustainable development and Shell'

(Malcolm Horton 27/7/99)

Using non-Shell e-mail address

I read the comment by RFG. I noticed his unwillingness to stand up for his views by putting his name clearly at the top or the bottom. Despite this I can see some value in his comments I think it is true that a company such as Shell will invest in renewables only in a context which will give a financial return – although this return may be in the long term and may not be as attractive as other… but I think the company owes a responsibility to individual investors to maintain financial strength. BUT I also see there is a will within Shell to pursue projects and policies which are to the general benefit of society (ies) within which we work. Part of this is a search for a 'renewable' 'sustainable' 'environmentally neutral' …call it what you want… source of energy. In the meantime we (and that means you as well) are all responsible for our own (ab)use of resources. Shell (or BP or Exxon or…) will provide petrol for your car if you drive it. If you cycle there will be no pollution from this You can live close to your work and not look to travel every weekend to friends and then twice during the year fly away on holiday - and through this reduce the impact of our society on the environment. You can turn that extra light off. Turn down the central heating and put on an extra pullover (or turn of the air-con and put on shorts). At the end of the day it is easy to point to large companies and blame them. In practise it is only by changing our own life-style, and demanding a sustainable life-style that we will change. AND its only by valuing other peoples success on their contribution towards this and not the size of their car –that we will achieve a sustainable world. Sorry I got a bit away from the start of the note…I point out my credentials…I work for Shell. This means I have chosen to work for Shell. This choice was not only made because I believed I would get a large salary cheque – of the two job offers I got leaving university this was clearly the lower salary – but because I believe in a company that is open in what it does and sometimes sets the pace in ethical issues. Its not perfect but which group of people is? In some ways I would like to be a member of an environmental pressure group.. but I think I am already, by being a member of the public. As I said above.. we can change

society only by changing the way we live in society and not by fighting against it. In Britain we have at least some talk with the present labour government of policies aimed at reduced personal transport…informed debate on genetic modification…We've along way to go, and we need to nurture these moves…not attempt to undermine them. We can only change by thinking…it is sad to me that the last comment on this page is nearly 2 months old…does anyone else have a view?? Finally ..these are all my own views… not necessarily those of my colleagues in Shell.

In this extract the responder uses an e-mail address (not shown) that does not readily identify him as a member of the company, thus not drawing on one of the few available identity markers in this communication genre (Correll, 1995). Other commentators have looked at how being understood to possess an explicit vested interest undermines the plausibility of an account (Potter, 1996). For example, women arguing a feminist case, or under-represented groups arguing for better representation, are susceptible to accusations of the kind 'you would say that'. By not beginning this response with a definite company-related identity marker the responder, we suggest, constructs an ambiguous authorial position. The reader, therefore, is not immediately drawn to search for a self-serving motive.

The turn, or utterance (Shotter, 1992, p. 13/14), begins with a criticism, not aimed at the content of the message, but at the understood etiquette surrounding conventions of communication: 'I noticed his unwillingness to stand up for his views by putting his name clearly' (lines 1-2). This is an identity-constructing opening. Conversation analysts have looked at the work done in openings to interactions and found they function to establish *legitimate* identities by constituting relationships between the interactants (He, 1996). In this instance, the phrasing works to challenge the claims made in the message as not strongly held and therefore less persuasive.

The responder continues to acknowledge some merit in the content of the original message. Research suggests that in times of crisis in organizations acknowledgements are more effective in maintaining legitimacy than are denials (Elsbach, 1994). In this instance, the speaker locates the company, 'a company *such as* Shell' (line 3), as one of many, a normalising technique, who attend to financial interests. These interests are, in this way, drawn on as the hegemonic discourse of what businesses are about, and it is within the parameters of this description that the company is constructed as also attending to environmental concerns (Coupland, 2002). In detail, the description of an environmental rhetoric is constructed through a three-part-list: 'renewable, sustainable, environmentally neutral' (lines 9-10). This device has been identified as a persuasive tool in talk (Jefferson, 1990; Potter, 1996), and functions to include current environmental discourse. Interestingly, this description is constructed *as* a discourse through 'call it what you want' (line 10), implying its status is *merely* talk. Contrast this description with the former reference to 'financial strength' (line 7) regarding which 'the company owes a responsibility to individual investors' (line 6). In this way, the constructed Shell identity is normalized by locating the company as attending to financial interests, in the same way as other commercial entities. Contrastingly, however, by highlighting their contested nature, environmental concerns are here construed not as 'essential' but as 'optional'.

The responsibility for the '(ab)use' (line 12) of resources is then explicitly located with the reader of the Web page. The arguments are represented as individual-to-individual, and the company positioned as a mere responder to demand. A device is then used which functions to construct the foregoing turn as an aside to the 'real' nature of the response. By stating 'sorry I got a bit away from the start of the note'

(lines 22-23), the author implies that it is not an intended part of his argument. However, it is not a conversation, this is a genre of communication which permits deletion of unintended comments before a message is sent. As the comments remain, although deemed off the point, they can reasonably be said to be there to do some discursive work. It is at this point that the author's relationship with the company is revealed: 'I work for Shell' (lines 23-24). This choice of employer is then accounted for in terms of a considered decision regarding the company's ethical stance. However, the company's ethical identity is qualified. It '*sometimes* sets the pace in ethical issues' (lines 27-28), and 'its not perfect but which group of people is?' (line 28). This works to normalise the claims being made. In this way, room for error, or deviation, is created by appealing to common-sense understandings regarding group behaviour.

Towards the end of the turn the author, already positioned as a member of the company, re-positions himself in alliance with the critical reader of the Forum: 'In some ways I would like to be a member of an environmental pressure group' (lines 28-29), and then translates what this might mean to the reader through, 'I am already by being a member of the public'. In this part of the turn, the author draws on membership in a way that is discursively persuasive to an imagined audience by aligning with that audience. The near-closing comments construct a *reasonable person* identity 'we can change society…not by fighting against it' (lines 30-32). These evoke a good citizen discourse which, by utilising the rhetoric of reasoned actions and argument, dialogically positions the reader who may be inclined to disagree, as unreasonable.

Message and Response 2

Message: ‘Clearing up those images’

(Enthymeme 4/9/01)

I recently saw your tv advertisement which tries to portray your company as being environmental caring and responsible. It has a female “environmentalist” professing that Shell is investing in the protection of nature and unlike all other oil companies, Shell has made a difference in preserving our natural environment. I thought “What a clever move!” Actually I was appalled at the kind of misinformation your company is willing to disseminate in your attempt to clear up the negative image you’ve acquired due to your misdeeds. The facts contradict your rhetoric. Your “profit over people” mentality and philosophy can hardly be supplanted and glossed over despite your proclamation of values and principles. Actions speak louder than words. If you are truly environmentally friendly and caring there is no need for such creative PR moves on your part. We know.

In a similar way to the poster of message 1, the motives of the company are in this extract constructed as dubious. The criticism is potent because defensive counter claims are simultaneously deemed to be questionable. At the beginning of the turn, ‘tries to portray’ (line 1) makes explicit both the understanding that it is a manipulated version of the company being shown in the advertisement, and its failure. The use of active voice: ‘What a clever move’ (line 5), is relevant as this is commonly regarded as a technique to establish objectivity by invoking others in support of a claim (Wooffitt, 1992). However, in this instance it is arguably combined with irony, and works to further construct the company as devious by making explicit a manipulative identity. Again, there is reference to past negative events being made relevant in this account of the organization. In line 8: ‘profit over people’, is probably a play on words taken from official reports produced by Shell called *Profits and Principles*. Criticism of both the putative corporate cognitive and belief systems is further constructed through, ‘mentality and philosophy’ (line 8). This functions to contrast evident, observable, talk and action with unseen, or hidden, motives, cognition and

beliefs, and makes their rebuttal difficult, as everything said and done by the company can be criticised in this way. This is confirmed in the closing part of the extract where 'creative PR moves' (lines 11-12) are described as unnecessary, and indeed evidence of ulterior motive. This message prompted the following reply.

Response: 'Response to Enthymeme'

(Wayne Gough 18/9/01)

Company e-mail address used

Dear Sir/Madam (I'm sorry but you do not give your name)
Thank you for your contribution to the profits and principles debate. As you say actions speak louder than words and you may be interested in the changes that have been taking place within Shell over the last few years. The ad that you refer to is part of a wider campaign known as 'Listening and Responding', which in turn is part of a process that was begun in 1995. Clearly the conviction that you are doing things right is not the same as getting them right. We began to realise at that time that we had become detached from society, and that this was not what a responsible company was about. In 1996 we undertook a worldwide programme of conversations with people to understand society's expectations of multinational companies, and another to explore the reputation, image and overall standing of the Group. This involved 7,500 members of the general public in 10 countries and 1,300 opinion leaders in 25 countries. We also interviewed 600 Shell people in 55 countries. The news was both good and bad. Half of the general public and opinion leaders had a favourable view of Shell, while 40% were neutral and 10% had an unfavourable opinion of us. Shell was thought to be wanting in its care for the environment and human rights by a small but significant group of people. We had looked in the mirror and we neither recognised nor liked what we saw. Since 1997 we have begun the process of integrating the ethos of Sustainable Development into the heart of our business, recognising that although we have to create wealth this has to be balanced with environmental concerns and social development. You can see how we are progressing in this field in the latest Shell report. The consultation with our stakeholders (which, as laid out in our business principles, includes society, employees, shareholders, those with whom we do business, and customers) is an ongoing process. The "profits and principles" campaign is designed to illicit [3] response from informed people to garner their ideas for how we should proceed with the changes. You mention that you were appalled by the "misinformation that we are prepared to disseminate", however to us one of the important aspects of the recent changes is our efforts towards transparency in everything we do. This is manifested in a number of ways including through the annual Shell report. This report is independently verified and is seen as a leader in the field of reporting to society. An important thing to note here is that more than 70% of the world's

oil is produced by nationally owned companies, companies who therefore are not open to the scrutiny of shareholders, stakeholders, consumers or society in general. This is not merely meant to imply that we are the lesser of two evils rather that we are increasingly open to the needs and concerns of society and as such have taken on board the need to respect the environment and societies in which we work. We are striving to become the first choice when governments are looking for partners to help them unlock their natural resources in a sustainable way. If our adverts prove anything it is not that we have a creative PR department but that our attitude towards the world has changed.
Regards
WG

Although the tone of this rejoinder is polite, it is also argumentative. The interactant is explicitly positioned, from the beginning, as speaking from within the company by using a Shell e-mail address. This functions to weaken the account in terms of vested interest, but may work to strengthen authority for the kind of argument the responder puts forward. In a similar way to the former response, this turn begins with what is arguably a veiled criticism of the format of the original message, by attending to the lack of a name which would identify the gender of the speaker: 'I'm sorry but you do not give your name' (line 1). This carries all the implications outlined earlier regarding not owning strongly held views, at least not strongly enough to claim ownership. In this way the opening sets the scene, the context in which the remaining text is interpreted by the readers of the message.

Following a description of deterioration in Shell's image, *change* is drawn on to construct distance between 'that was then, this is now' in terms of one organizational identity: 'you may be interested in the changes that have been taking place' (lines 3-4). As Linde (1993) asserts, in narrating past events the author is always moral, i.e. a reflexive stance on doing what seemed right at the time works to create a *current* moral identity. Further, a description is given regarding what being a responsible company means in terms of its relationship to society: 'we began to realise at that time

that we were becoming detached from society and that this was not what a responsible organization was about' (lines 8-9). One implication here is that becoming aware of this occurrence is (supposedly) indicative of being a responsible company. In addition, the location of change is described as internal to the organization, although based on external influences. This has been described elsewhere in terms of its implications for constructing coherent, 'authentic', corporate identities (Coupland, 2002). The respondent further supports this argument: 'we had looked in the mirror and we neither recognised nor liked what we saw' (lines 18-19) as a response to a 10% unfavourable view from outside the company. Arguably, a morally aware identity is construed which functions to suggest that change resulted from internal growth, albeit facilitated by external pressure. Locating the impetus for change endogenously works to emphasise the good properties/actions of the company. This, we suggest is one authorial strategy by which organizational identities are constructed as agentic.

An amended company identity is referred to by the responder: 'we have begun the process of integrating Sustainable Development into the heart of our business' (lines 20-21). The capital letters in 'Sustainable Development' might be taken to imply that this refers to something which is concrete rather than abstract, and evidence for this is described as being available in a Shell report, (lines 23-24). Legitimacy for the report is claimed through: 'independently verified and is seen as a leader in the field of reporting to society' (lines 33-34). In these terms, the environmental focus of the company has become a proceduralised concern, which is measured and reported upon both within the company and to outsiders. This aligns quite closely with Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) findings that suggest, over time, actions taken on identity-changing

issues re-position an organization in its environment. They argue that issues can actually be transformed into opportunities for a company to enhance its reputation with outside agencies. In this case, the responder (Wayne Gough), has taken the opportunity to construct an established and verified stance on environmental issues in response to explicit criticism. This contrasts with Elsbach and Kramer's (1996) finding that cognitive distress and identity dissonance result from *inaccurate* or *unfair* descriptions of an organization. We suggest that, by attending to the text of an interaction, we can examine *how* organization members make *legitimate* responses to what they deem to be unjust descriptions of their organization. Changed identity-supporting procedures are made visible, and function to legitimate the change, in the process of responding to explicit criticism, in this Web page interaction.

One direction for further research emerging from this study is consideration of how one of the organization's preferred identities, in this instance a socially responsible identity, is legitimised through procedure and structure. An example shown in the extracts is through the use of capital letters as part of a response to criticism ('Sustainable Development', Response 2, lines 20-21), which we contend suggests a proceduralized, structured, environmental focus. The argument here is that the *appearance* of fact and the *appearance* of truth are key in interaction. Continuing with the notion that language is an opaque, active phenomenon leads us to contrast our findings with those of scholars who look for cognitive explanations of similar phenomena. Elsbach and Kramer (1996, p.469), for example, say that they are 'struck by the pervasive creative use of selective categorisation processes to maintain positive perceptions of an organization's identity'. This intimates findings, which are richer than the categories they have described in their paper, and suggests a need for an

approach, such as ours, that does not relegate language to the role of conduit. Finally, it is worth noting that, while these interactions being Web-based, the participants have borrowed conventions of etiquette from other communicative media to criticise and undermine their antagonists' arguments.

In summary, and prior to our theoretical discussion, we should note some interesting similarities and contrasts between the two message-response interactions that we have analysed. The two initial message posters both attack Shell by offering alternative interpretations of the motives that drive the company's behaviours and public statements. 'Red Faced Greenie' interprets 'investments' as 'bribes', while 'Enthymeme' portrays a television advertisement as a devious and baseless attempt by Shell to construct an 'environmentally friendly' identity. The two responders to these messages, Malcolm Horton and Wayne Gough, contest these views by seeking to normalise the commercial activities and economic goals of businesses and present Shell as acting reasonably within constraints. Malcolm Horton's response does this while also locating the responsibility for excessive energy demand with 'outsiders' who can, for instance, choose to cycle, live close to their place of work and "turn that extra light off" (Line 16). Shell, on this view, is doing no more than respond to society's needs. Wayne Gough, by contrast, tells a story of organizational identity change that distances the Shell of today, which is "open to the needs and concerns of society" (Line 38) from the Shell of yesteryear that "had become detached from society" (Line 8). Both responses are designed not merely to mitigate criticisms of Shell, but to make further attacks on the organization more difficult by positioning the authors as potential allies championing an environmentalist agenda.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have analysed two e-mail exchanges posted on the Forum section of Shell's Web site in order to sketch the sort of contribution that a discourse analytic methodology can make to our understanding of issues centred on organizational identities. Rather than reduce our findings to patterns of argument, contestation and defence, isolated from their context, we have employed the strategy of displaying whole sections of text that constituted a full written turn. This strategy has enabled us to highlight an important characteristic of identity-as-argument. Identities are discursive achievements, and persuasion of others of the legitimacy of the claims being made, (the arguments), are made visible in the messages we have analysed. This is a complex process best illustrated by examining how the differing strategies of each of the interactants (i.e. ostensible insiders and ostensible outsiders), work together to construct plausible cases. Our perspective has important implications for understanding organizations in relation to identities, boundaries, legitimacy, and collective reflexivity.

Our discourse analytic approach suggests that, in the case of the postings examined in this study, organizational identities are not solely defined by leaders or corporate relations specialists, but are continuously negotiated and re-negotiated by internal participants and external stakeholders. Organizational identities do not refer to a corporate persona or a set of shared traits or beliefs, but are constituted through conversations centred on identity issues. Organizational identities, and cognates such as image and reputation, are not singular or unitary 'things' that can be simply observed and easily measured. Rather, they are emergent aspects of an organization-centred discourse. There are at least as many identity, image and reputation

attributions to a given organization as there are participants and stakeholders in it. Indeed, our theoretical position suggests that each individual may sequentially make many, different, sometimes competing, sometimes consonant, identity-relevant attributions in different contexts and for different audiences (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Harrison, 2000). Web sites, such as Shell's Forum, are of course just one of many locations in which identity work takes place. Such fora are, though, of particular interest because they are one of relatively few opportunities that nominal insiders and outsiders have to publicly air and exchange views.

Our conceptualization suggests that those theories that locate organizational identities within the putatively strict confines of an organization's 'official' boundaries are inadequate. Consonant with previous theorising (e.g., Ford, 1999) we argue that organizational identities emerge through the interplay of narratives embedded in conversations between insiders and between insiders and outsiders. This view has been explored by scholars in both organization theory (e.g., Scott and Lane, 2000) and communication studies (e.g., Cheney and Vibbert, 1987; Cheney and Christensen, 2001), who have problematized notions of organizational boundaries. It is now recognised that the boundaries of organizations are 'managed symbolically' through 'the creative and evocative power of language' by members of organizations seeking to influence and to construct their external audiences (Cheney and Vibbert, 1987, p.176). Moreover, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between internally and externally directed communication to the extent that some authors have argued that they no longer constitute separate fields in practice (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Berg, 1986). The Shell Forum is a particularly good example of a site for communication that is 'not neatly circumscribed' and which involves both 'internal

and external functions in ways that blur their presumed boundaries' (Cheney and Christensen, 2001, p.232).

As an effort to cope with growing demands to listen to relevant publics and incorporate these publics into organizational decision making processes, the Forum represents a means of claiming and maintaining legitimate status. Legitimacy refers to the perception that someone or something is desirable, proper and appropriate in a given social context (e.g., Suchman, 1995). Members of organizations seek legitimacy in order to gain access to resources, and to avoid claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary (e.g., Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Employee perceptions of organizational legitimacy are also important in order to maintain requisite levels of acquiescence, enthusiasm, and commitment to structures, strategies and other processes of organizing (e.g., Pfeffer 1981). This has been described elsewhere as a 'politics of identity' (Shotter, 1992 p19) [4]. However, although this suggests access to (or exclusion from) different ways of being, it may usefully be considered within a framework of argumentation. Our suggestion is that legitimacy, both for individuals and organizations, is constructed in interaction through the deployment of argumentation repertoires (Sillince, 1999).

The Shell Forum is a site that (putatively) signals the organization's acute sensitivity to different views, and a willingness to respond positively to constructive criticism. It is apparently overtly designed to legitimate the organization with respect to a variety of stakeholder groups, including both Shell employees and other interested parties, who take openness and responsiveness as tokens of credibility. In these ways, the Forum performs similar functions to, for example, annual reports and accounts, letters

to shareholders, advertisements, and other public relations communications (e.g., Elsbach, 1994; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Unlike these traditional means of manipulating perceptions of the organization, however, the Forum is a less stable, less controlled, and less predictable discursive space in which the reproduction and maintenance of corporate hegemony is continually threatened. Hegemonic assertions, which represent ideological positions as 'common sense' or 'natural', seek to mobilise and reproduce the active consent of others (Gramsci, 1971; Clegg, 1989). The Forum is a site on which large numbers of messages incorporating distinctive hegemonic positions were posted. Here, different discourses interpolate one another undermining organizational efforts to fix meaning or to gain total rhetorical control of discursive space (Humphreys and Brown, 2002).

Finally, one way in which the Forum can be theorized is as an overt opportunity for the sort of organization identity-focused critical self-reflexivity that Brown and Starkey (2000) suggest is a valuable means of facilitating organizational learning. From this perspective, the debates posted on the Forum can be interpreted as illustrative of a reflexive consideration of what constitutes 'self' at all levels of analysis from the individual to the macro-organizational. That is, as efforts to discover 'time- and context-sensitive identities' for Shell, that surface Pascale's (1990) 'vectors of contention' and assist the development of constructive 'alternative scenarios of the future' (Brown and Starkey, 2001, p.111; cf. Gephart, 1996). On this reading, while it is probably too early to judge whether Shell's Forum will encourage learning, the discourse it carries seems to serve the ends of strategic management. It is, after all, Shell that is the primary focus for discussion, the information on Shell's Web site that is the main source of information for those who post messages, and

Shell staff who control the site (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985; Trujillo and Toth, 1987). Alternatively, and in contrast with this managerialist interpretation, the Forum might be understood as 'an autocommunicative ritual that helps constitute the rhetor and its identity in an emergent environment' (Cheney and Christensen, 2001, p.225). According to this view, members of organizations construct self-enhancing reference points (such as Web sites) which are confirmed by a closed-circuit 'dialogue' with outsiders. The exchange of ideas is a mere ritual, an end in itself that 'helps preserve an illusion of organizational control' while functioning to maintain and confirm their existing identities (Cheney and Christensen, 2001, p.252; cf. Luhmann, 1990; Maturana and Varela, 1980).

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have outlined a view of organizational identities as discursive constructions. While our analyses of the extracts are not generalizable, our analytical approach has broad applicability, and may be used to investigate not only Web sites, but documents such as annual reports and letters to shareholders. We have argued that through strategies, conscious and/or unconscious, of persuasion ranging from etiquette conventions, through downplaying *mere* talk, to 'good citizen' discourse, our interactants demonstrate how message posters and responders engage in identity work. Our view represents a critique of some current ways of theorising and researching collective identities, and of efforts to construct simple generic notions such as 'construed external image' and 'reputation' insensitive to issues of plurality and diversity. Organizations, we maintain, are constituted by conversations, and fragments of conversations, in which many voices strive to be heard, and identity

issues are appropriately understood in this argumentative media. We regard the major contributions of this paper as residing in our foci on identity-as-argument, the techniques of persuasion and the role of communicative context. While dominant groups may often seek to impose their hegemonic collective identity constructions on others (Gramsci, 1971), we, as scholars, should attempt to capture something of the polyphony and heterogeneity that characterise organizations (Rhodes, 2001). A discursive approach, we suggest, is one way in which such work can be accomplished.

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Notes

1. In response to our questions on this issue the Webmaster stated “We do have ‘Issues Managers’ who are asked to go into the forum and look after their ‘Issues’. Some of them do and some of them prefer to pass their response back to me and I answer on their behalf. However, the site is open to anyone outsider and insider to make comment”.
2. Since we collected our data the nature of the Forum has altered. When we collected our data the Forum operated like a ‘chat-line’ where anyone could join a thread and comment on others’ views. By May 2003 the Forum had become a much more standard and structured ‘question and response’ site on which questions posted by ostensible outsiders were answered by a relatively small number of Shell insiders. At the time of writing the version of the Forum that we refer to is described on the Shell Web site as ‘first generation’. In response to our questions, the site Webmaster suggested that the site would continue to evolve, and that “We would like it to be a debating place where we could look in and see what issues are being raised as potential future problems that we could begin to address”.
3. Here the author may have meant ‘elicit’.
4. See Wayne Gough’s response to Enthymeme, lines 34-36 as an example of this.